



NEWS from U.S. Senator Bob Dole

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FRIDAY, APRIL 7, 1978 BOB DOWNEN

STATEMENT OF SENATOR BOB DOLE
11:30 a.m., Friday, April 7, 1978

PANAMANIAN OBJECTIONS SHOW TREATIES SHOULD BE REJECTED

Mr. President, the DeConcini Reservation adopted by the Senate on March 16 contained the very important guarantee that:

"...if the Canal is closed, or its operations are interfered with, the United States of America and the Republic of Panama shall each independently have the right to take such steps as it deems necessary, in accordance with its constitutional processes, including the use of military force in Panama, to reopen the Canal or restore the operations of the Canal, as the case may be."

It was essentially the same as a treaty amendment I had offered a few days before, which was rejected after the Senate Leadership argued that the guarantee was already "understood" in the treaties, and that any such amendment was out of the question.

A few days afterwards, a leading government-controlled newspaper in Panama, CRITICA, suggested that the DeConcini reservation was unacceptable.

Now, General Torrijos has said as much in letters to the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and to European leaders. It shows that Panama is not prepared to abide by this critical guarantee, which is so important to future American security interests. And it shows that there is no consensus, or agreement between our two governments on important aspects of these treaties.

The Torrijos government could take the initiative to reject the Neutrality Treaty, because of the DeConcini reservation, although I doubt it. But even when the Torrijos government formally ratifies the treaty, it seems clear to this senator that these guarantees will not be honored in practice. If both popular opinion and government sentiment are opposed to the reservation, we cannot depend upon its being honored at the crucial moment when it is most needed.

This is one reason why the treaties should be rejected by the Senate now, and negotiations begun anew.

DEMONSTRATIONS TODAY

It is my understanding that there will be large demonstrations today in Panama against these treaties -- particularly against the DeConcini reservation to the Neutrality Treaty. That reservation is very important to United States security. But many Panamanian people do not like it. If another plebiscite were held in Panama today, it might well be rejected.

Consequently, I do not think we can expect that the Panamanian people will strictly observe, or readily consent to our defense rights during the next 22 years, even if the Panama government ratifies the treaties. That is what concerns me most.

ATTEMPT TO CONCEAL TREATY PROVISIONS

The Panama government recognizes the popular dissatisfaction with the Neutrality treaty in Panama, as it was passed by the Senate on March 16. That is why General Torrijos tried to keep the facts from his people as long as possible. The final version of the Neutrality Treaty, with our Senate modifications, was not publically disseminated in Panama until March 27, fully eleven days after we approved the Treaty, and then only under pressure by local groups. The DeConcini reservation was printed incorrectly the first time, giving it a less "threatening" appearance.

Opening day for Panamanian universities has been delayed by the Government for several weeks, until April 17, to keep a lid on the extremely volatile situation. Student activists in Panama are, of course, among the leading treaty opponents.

TYPE OF TREATY MODIFICATION IS IMPORTANT

The objections to the DeConcini reservation show just how vital it is that we make all Senate modifications by concrete treaty changes, rather than by "understandings." Only amendments make textual changes in the treaties. They may require a new plebiscite in Panama, but that at least puts the Panamanian people on record as supporting or opposing the changes.

There are fundamental hazards in putting our trust in sideline "understandings" which might be quietly accepted by the Torrijos government today, but disavowed and ignored by the Panamanian people later on, perhaps under a different government.

The Senate Majority and Minority leaders, along with the floor managers of this treaty, assured us only last month that this and other treaty modifications were "unnecessary" because United States defense rights were already "understood." They said it was "redundant" to spell out those rights because President Carter and General Torrijos already had implicit understandings along these lines.

Well, the loud outcry and strenuous objections of the Panamanian people -- and of General Torrijos -- show that these guarantees were not understood. Either General Torrijos tried to pull a fast one on his own people, or else on us.

Therefore, Mr. President, I feel we should reject these treaties now. There has been no consensus -- no agreement -- between Panama and the United States on vital defense aspects. It is time to go back to the negotiating table and discuss these matters in more detail.